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ABSTRACT

The author describes her experiences teaching a computer-enhanced Modern Poetry course. The author argues that using computers enhances the concept of the classroom as learning community. It was the author's experience that students' postings on the discussion board created an atmosphere that encouraged student involvement, as opposed to the traditional environment in which the instructor maintains an authoritative control over the classroom. The author also suggests that students use Web sites to enhance their learning, rather than as a source for plagiarism, as some educators fear. The computers facilitated group work, allowing for less instructor feedback, and more from peers, which in turn helped students to be more accountable for their work. In addition, through postings, the weaker students can learn to imitate stronger verbal skills, and can learn more appropriate ways to present their own work and critique that of others. The paper suggests that the instructor needs to be clear about the desired outcomes of the course, the guidelines for participation, and thoughts and questions to generate during discussion. In addition, there should be a balance between the facilitator and the participants' interactions. The learning community brought together by computer-enhanced instruction changes the attitudes of both students and instructors. (NB)

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Let Me Share a Secret With You! Teaching With Computers

Maria de Vasconcelos

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Let Me Share A Secret With You! Teaching With Computers.

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An academic memory that remains with me is the image of my professor of Classic Culture. He taught what the Classic University of Lisbon called, "As Teóricas" (Theory). This was a core course comprised of lectures he delivered to 400-600 students in a very large amphitheater. "As Práticas" (Practice) were companion classes of 25-30 students where we read and discussed classic texts. It was an arrangement in which we learned comprehensive information pertaining to the curriculum in philology.

Professor Manuel Antunes was and still is **the** professor for my friends and me. His knowledge of the cultures and languages in which he was fluent was encyclopedic. He was our hero and yet, when he taught us, we couldn't understand much of what he was explaining. His thinking processes were clear, but we lacked the basic knowledge and skills to take advantage of such high-level scholarship. However, we understood a concept here and there, and we were motivated to talk in cafes, movie theaters, or at home about those classic materials. Even without fully understanding our professor, my colleagues and I knew that in the future we would need that information, and would make sense of it.

He was the upright pedagogue whom I have wanted to emulate. I admire his extraordinary scholarship, his humility, and his sense of humor. His breadth of knowledge and the intellectual and cultural connections he made took his students on imaginary voyages, for example, from modern times to Classical Greece. Professor Antunes guided us through the great Indian epics and the oral tradition of Africa.

Naturally, at BMCC today the setting is different and the pedagogical methods most of us use are dissimilar to the ones he practiced, but my memories of him remind me that effective teaching is about transformation. His lectures were fascinating, and, besides entertaining and engaging us fully, they transmitted a respect for rigorous intellectual

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endeavors that transformed us as students. Similarly, instructors at BMCC want to inspire change in their students. We are also concerned with examining our pedagogy and evolving as teachers. In order for this transformation to occur in school, the academic environment has to support various dialogues- between students and professors, among students, among faculty, and with the administration. The entire community can reflect critically on pedagogical methods, on specific questions such as grading policies, and on personal beliefs and perceptions. These discussions occur in a variety of venues, first and foremost in our classrooms. Through such discussions students generally begin to develop a set of professional attitudes and skills that includes writing, comprehension, critical thinking, and even decorum.

In the Modern Poetry course I teach, for example, students may begin the semester having difficulty expressing themselves with the rigor required by the discipline. They tend not to differentiate between critique and criticism. By the end of the semester, though, they become more articulate using the language of literary criticism. They evaluate the poetry they read as well as one another's work and substantiate their claims. Inspired by the pedagogical role model I had in Professor Antunes, I want my students to become intellectually alert and creative, as he inspired us to be. I would like them to possess vision, confidence, perseverance, focus and empathy. I aim at democratic classroom management, engaging in a process for curriculum development and instructional practices that can support the equitable sharing of power and, in so doing, allow continual growth in the classroom. Besides teaching discipline-related information, I encourage students to explore, experiment, and take risks. Also, in my classroom there is space for ethical ideals so that moral meaning, civility, and tolerance can guide classroom interactions. In sum, I believe in multicultural education, critical pedagogy, transformative learning, and collaborative learning communities.

As a result of these pedagogical ideals, when the possibility of applying for a Title III grant arose, I applied eagerly. I thought that if I could rethink my pedagogy, maybe I would be able to achieve a few goals in a faster and more interesting way for students. But I was also skeptical. I had been exposed to technology a few years before when we

could go to the first floor at BMCC to send e-mail, which took hours at that time; after that I read about computers and attended two conferences on technology, and what I experienced did not persuaded me. I was unconvinced by reports of computer- mediated courses. For example, two years ago at a Montgomery Technology Conference, despite some good presentations on the role of graphics in a course and on images illustrating content in the disciplines, nothing I heard seemed sounder than what most of us do in face to face courses. In one session the presenters demonstrated how they had incorporated web-based pictures of a hearse and a bright blue sky to illustrate images in Emily Dickinson's poems. This activity seemed to restrict the scope of the images a poem could evoke for a student. It was an example of teacher-centered pedagogy instead of student-centered learning. The students did not have the opportunity to project who they were and their experiences of the world into the reading of the poem. Rather, the instructors generated images based on the poem and found pictures to match their readings of the poems. As a result, this activity seemed authoritarian. Besides, the emphasis seemed to me on the artistic apparatus and not on a well thought out pedagogy. It did not seem open-ended enough for the students to develop both critical thinking and imagination.

Along with these initial frustrations with technology, I felt that I could not rob my students of a few epiphanies in the classroom, as I had tasted in Professor Antune's. Of course, in criticizing others' methods, I reveal vanity: Am I thinking that students and I could make those happen? And how could computer-mediated pedagogy help us?

I wanted to learn about these possibilities, and in our Title III weekly meetings I became one of the questioning voices. I knew using a computer to teach could change the mode of teaching and the nature of an instructor's assignments. However, in my face-to-face classes I was already using many of the learning situations the computer lab makes possible, such as group work, research, and tests with access to primary and secondary sources.

Still, I was learning how to think differently about computer-enhanced pedagogy and enjoying my training and collaboration with other faculty. I grew curious about what I might do during the semester when I taught Modern Poetry enhanced by computers. On our winter break, I read a few books on instruction online and thought about what I wanted to accomplish with the students. I came to the conclusion that the golden rule for beginners is--make it simple. This seemed both my opportunity and my destiny. The technological steps in the course would have to be simple, not only because of my limited computer literacy, but also because I wanted to think of different ways to approach the difficult content of modern poetry. I remember walking back and forth on the beach in the south of Barbados over the winter break, imagining scenarios, frames. questions that my first computer-mediated course would have to respond to.

Now after a semester teaching a computer- enhanced course I feel that this medium liberated my imagination. Therefore, I present my students' passion and mine to you. I became so involved with the students' good work and progress that I was reading all of their postings instead of a selected few. I stopped just asking for a research paper on a topic as I used to do; I created working frames out of their postings, which indicated their passions for or interests for the work of the poets.

A similar transformation occurred with my students after a few weeks of the semester. Students almost simultaneously enhanced critical thinking skills, literary taste, and creative skills. In addition to traditional research papers, they created innovative ones, offering their fellow students and me, for instance, informed, delightful trips around the world where they would lecture about modern poetry. They would have a nineteenth century Thanksgiving dinner in London with the poets Hardy and Hopkins or, in contrast, here with the poets, Dickinson and Whitman. The only rules they had to honor were to supply accurate information, based on their Web research, about the details of the place, time, customs, traditions, and voices. They could parody them too.

Students became as passionate about their pilgrimages in class as I did. And if they were angry at me at the beginning of the semester because I did not allow lateness, a few

weeks later, not only did they arrive on time, they arrived early and stayed half an hour or twenty minutes late, at times making me late for my meetings. And I was not annoyed. They discovered the real meaning of a learning community that was taking great pleasure in their research and writing. This experience developed my passion for teaching with computers. I want to extend this opportunity to all my classes.

Some critics of technology in the classroom worry that students will copy from the websites instead of doing their own work. However, if students make personal choices in an essay, adding the information and rigor of the discipline and imaginative and accurate settings, it does not matter how much access they have to books, encyclopedias, the web, and links to various sites, they cannot be accused of plagiarism. Moreover, cheating on work or plagiarism is less likely when knowledge is acquired collaboratively.

Students' engagement and these brief conclusions are valuable to me. My experience taught me that in facing a computer as an instructional tool, faculty has to rethink how one teaches. Consider the following if you intend to teach with computers:

- The learning community brought together by computer-enhanced instruction changes attitudes at a fast pace—for instructors and students alike.
- Technology allows for a more meaningful learning experience; postings on the Blackboard discussion board reveal a constant flow of students' perceptions.
- The learning experience depends on the instructor's formal and informal assignments that motivate students to delve into the subject matter and research it creatively.
- With less instructor feedback and more from peers, students become more accountable for their own progress, which is exhibited in every class and in the postings done at home. Their feedback to their fellow students reveals their serious commitment to the process of learning, because they are always reflecting on their work and the work of others.
- Because the basic guidelines for the course are posted on Blackboard and made explicit at the beginning of the semester, students can review them according to the real situations and progress of the class. The guide- lines can reflect more accurately what happens in the process of learning.

- Also, through the postings weaker students learn how to imitate what they consider better diction, better grammar, and literary critique. Students develop more appropriate ways to present their work and critique their own work and their peers'. Their critiques support and encourage the others.
- They become professionals of literature. They develop standards just by reading their fellow students' work daily and commenting on it. Often, they offer solutions to what they consider misreadings and at times reconcile differences and become aware of what it means to develop a voice.

Yes, bring your best classroom practices into a new environment, but they will not be exactly the same. You still need to be very clear about the outcomes of the course, guidelines for participation, and thoughts and questions to generate the discussion. The instructor also has to incorporate peer feedback on assignments into the evaluation of students' progress, which later contributes to the grade. There must be equality of participant-facilitator and participants' interaction, and in this group dynamic all of us develop an "electronic mask" that surfaces throughout the semester. In this kind of learning community all of us can relax.

So, in the Spring of 2001, at last, I replaced my former professor for good with an open, confident, trusting learning community that would not have been possible without students' minds, their passions, and the friendly computer. As one of the students wrote,

> I have really enjoyed this poetry class, because I have never studied poetry before and now I enjoy it. I even was able to find a poet that I really like—Emily Dickinson. I plan, even after this course, to study poetry on my own. I find [it] very calming and interesting to read. I found it difficult to analyze the poems, especially those, that have so many allusions that take us back to historical times. In reading Modern Poetry, I also learned a lot about history, religion, and mythology. In writing my research papers, I was able to enjoy a lot of poems, especially those of my favorite poet. I particularly liked the work with the computer, which facilitated so many assignments, especially the test about our

trip around the world. The web allowed us to take magic trips. In addition because I am shy, I enjoyed Maria's and my fellow-students' on line postings. It was great to add mine to the class discussions.

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